

Security Information

30 November 1953

MEMORANDUM FOR: Deputy Director, Intelligence

SUBJECT: The Reported Establishment of
a South Korean Joint Chiefs
of Staff

Two possible explanations may be offered for Rhee's reported decision (CIO, 25 Nov) to establish a formalized joint chiefs of staff at this time: (1) a desire to have an over-all command agency, to replace the UN Command, capable of commanding the large military establishment, and (2) an effort by Rhee to neutralize the power of the military, the one center out of which internal opposition could easily develop.

South Korean military forces have been under the UN Command since 1950. Rhee, however, retains the authority to withdraw them at any time, although there are no indications that he intends to do so. The establishment of a JCS has been under consideration by South Korean officials for many months; hence, it is difficult to tie its imminent establishment to any recent event. Rhee may simply believe that sooner or later US/UN troops will be pulled out of Korea and that at such a time some over-all command agency must be ready to assume the UNC's responsibilities. Since the indications that Rhee will not take military action without full American support are presently preponderant, this may be the best explanation for the reported move, without, however, discounting the capabilities of the JCS in directing unilateral military action.

At the same time, the establishment of a JCS now may have special significance in view of President Eisenhower's 12 November letter to Rhee. This letter is not available to G-2, but it presumably informed Rhee not to expect American aid if he should renew efforts to unify Korea militarily. Rhee may, therefore, have concluded that he must have his own JCS to carry out anticipated military action which the US/UN will apparently not undertake. [In this connection, it may be noteworthy that approximately one week after receipt of the President's letter, the South Korean army attache in Washington contacted G-2, expressing interest in the method by which the American JCS was set up, and asking for the legislation establishing this agency in 1949.]

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Rhee's ignoring of General Taylor's advice appears to be part of a pattern which has been prominent during recent political and economic negotiations. Before and during the hostilities, Rhee was content to leave military matters almost wholly in the hands of American military advisers. At the same time he has always recognized that the army, with its potentiality of taking direct action for political purposes, remains largely beyond his control. While the army is not an articulate political force, Rhee recognizes that various factions of army officers have political associations with his opponents, or are neutral -- an equally suspect position. Because the army's potential for such action has increased with the development of its forces and with the growing experience and confidence of senior officers, Rhee has attempted to control the army by playing off factions against one another and by developing control over the strongest faction in the army. This policy has deprived the Japanese and Chinese factions of the army of their former power and has left the "Manchurian Officer's Clique" as the sole repository of effective power.

For the past year, Rhee has attempted to secure control over this remaining group by exploiting a number of intra-factional rivalries. The Manchurian clique is split three ways between Chief of Staff Paek Sun-yop, II Corps Commander Chong Il-kwon, and PMGC Chief Won Yong-tok. Won has additional help from Lieutenant General Yi Hyong-kun who, although Japanese-trained, is reportedly second to Won in Rhee's favor. It is possible that Rhee, knowing the mutual dislike of these factional leaders for each other, can extend his familiar "divide-and-rule" tactics to this clique and thus secure ultimate control over it. This would be facilitated by giving Paek command of the field forces, Chong the position of army chief of staff, and Yi chairmanship of the JCS, their mutual rivalries preventing any one of them from emerging as a political threat to Rhee. Paek and Chong oppose unilateral action, but Yi is on record as favoring a northward attack if so ordered.

General Yi, who currently commands the I Corps, graduated from the Tokyo Military Academy in 1942 and from the Tokyo Field Artillery School in 1943. In 1946, he received a direct commission as captain in the South Korean army, and by 1949, had become a brigadier general. After serving as military attaché in Washington, he returned to Korea where he commanded successively the 2nd, 8th and 5th Divisions and the III Corps. American officers regard him as an outstanding military technician in all respects.

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